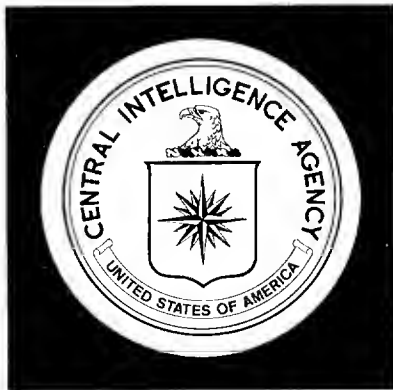


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Intelligence Memorandum

*The European Parliament:
Will Europe Go to the Polls?*

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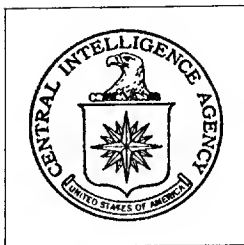
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March 2, 1976

The European Parliament: Will Europe Go to the Polls?

Summary

The decision by the EC Nine last December directly to elect delegates to the European Parliament in May or June of 1978 has touched off what may be the most important debate over European integration since the ill-fated European Defense Community was launched in the early 1950s.

At a time when "pragmatism" has more and more become the touchstone of progress in the community, the prospective election—the first multinational balloting in Europe's history—has reminded people that the EC's business is after all politics. In contrast with Belgian Prime Minister Tindemans' recent "wiseman's" report with its focus on small steps to strengthen community institutions and advance economic coordination, the election agreement has exhumed all the old "theological" arguments over supranationalism vs. inter-governmental cooperation and federalism vs. confederation.

Although the provision for direct elections was written into the community treaties more than two decades ago, it is doubtful that the Nine have fully appreciated either the problems or implications of trying to carry it out. For the 1978 election, they have already given up on trying to institute the "uniform procedures" the treaties called for. They also hope to keep safely buried the old dispute between those who have argued that parliament cannot be given greater powers until it is directly elected and those who have responded that the elections will be meaningless without a prior increase in those powers.

The Nine cannot avoid, however, such questions as the size of the parliament, the distribution of its seats, and election procedures. The answers obviously depend on hard decisions on whether the EC will have nine, twelve, or even more members by 1980—and even more crucially, on what balance of influence should be struck within it between the large and small countries. And those decisions cannot be reached without regard for the impact they will have on debates already raging in several of the countries on domestic electoral reform, regional decentralization, the future role of the Communist left, and other issues.

This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence. Comments and queries may be addressed to [redacted]

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The hope, perhaps exaggerated, of the more fervent communitarians has been that elected European deputies—debating issues of community rather than purely national interest—would introduce the normal features of a democratic parliament to the community as a whole. The European body would be influenced by lobbies and pressure groups, parliamentary blocs would be formed, and political forces would increasingly assume a pan-European character.

The political parties are in fact already looking across national borders for allies. But the controversies opened up by the Nine's decision on elections may yet prove so divisive that the purpose of the EC leaders in taking it—to instill a sense of movement to community affairs—could be defeated. Were the prospect of elections to run out in endless national debates, the fact that the building of "Europe" had for a time captured political and popular attention would be only a small gain.

The Nine are already somewhat behind their original schedule for approving a convention to implement the elections; if the very thorny problem of parliamentary size and division of seats can be settled by, or at, the EC summit in early April, however, the convention will be initiated then. This now seems somewhat questionable, despite the pressure that the heads of government will be under. Paris has shown little give in its preference, supported to some extent by London, for parceling out the membership proportionally to population and thus slighting the smaller states. The UK itself is still carefully hedging its willingness even to participate in the initial elections.

When the convention comes up for ratification in the national parliaments, even more bruising battles for political advantage may take place. In France, for example, the Communists and some Gaullists—speaking the truth with a clarity that perhaps only chauvinism can inspire—have proclaimed their opposition to elections which are a mere cover for progressively relinquishing national sovereignty. For Communist chief Marchais, a directly elected parliament "would be dominated by a majority of politicians beholden to multinational corporations and, in addition, dominated by West Germany." A ruling may be sought in France on whether the balloting requires a constitutional amendment.

The British parliament will have to wrestle with Scottish demands, among others, for adequate representation and possibly with calls for an early change to proportional representation. Germany may yet have a problem—with the Soviets and perhaps also domestically—over the status of West Berlin's delegates to the European body.

One thing nevertheless seems certain if the go-ahead for popular elections is confirmed: the community will have embarked on an exciting, if unpredictable, new course of political activity whose impact will be felt long before 1978.

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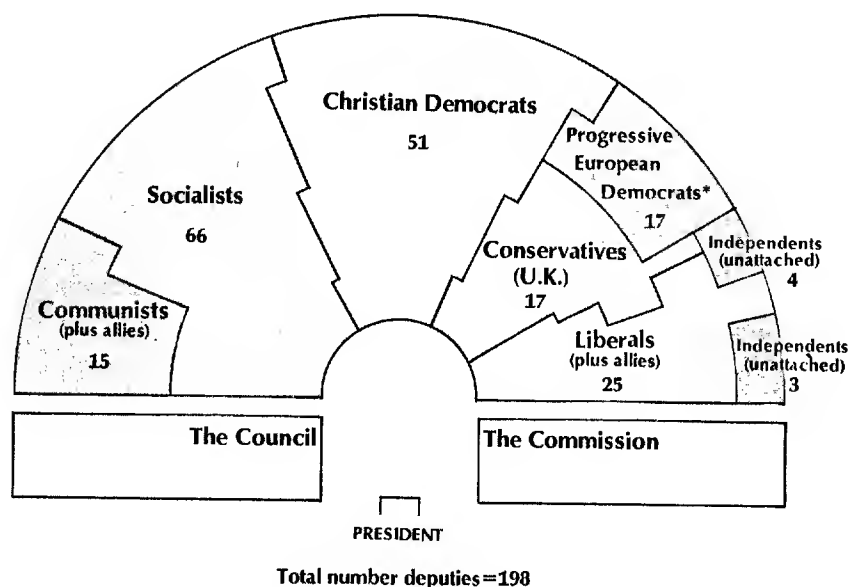
Parliament Now

The community has had a parliament—which the Gaullists still prefer to call by its treaty-given name of “assembly”—for nearly a quarter century. Probably due to its fairly low profile and limited powers, it is sometimes still confused with Europe’s even weaker quasi-legislative, consultative forums: the Assembly of the West European Union and the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly.

The European Parliament’s 198 deputies, representing a constituency of about 250 million, are all chosen by the member governments from the membership of their national parliaments. The more than fifty individual political parties represented are not organized into national sections but into six “European” groups based on broadly shared political outlooks. Members normally adhere to the decision of their group in voting.

The principal officer is the president—French Socialist Georges Spenale since March 1975—and he, together with the 12 vice presidents, composes the bureau. Although elected to a one-year term, the president is normally re-elected for a second year. A dozen-odd standing and specialized committees, each including members from all member states and all of the six

The European Parliament



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*French Gaullists and Irish Fianna Fail

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political groups, perform the detailed work of the parliament and serve as the point of liaison between it and the EC Commission.

The parliament sits in plenary one week a month in either Luxembourg, where its secretariat is located, or in Strasbourg. Committee work requires additional time in Brussels each month for most members. The alternative siting, although cumbersome and time-consuming, is the result of a fragile political compromise and is unlikely to be changed soon.

Powers

Although community treaties define the parliament's function as "advisory and supervisory," it has never had the necessary authority to exercise the intended democratic control over the EC's activities. Its impact on community policies and their formation, while growing, is still meager. Its only real weapon is the right to dismiss the Commission by censure motion; though threatened, this means has never been employed. In addition, because the Commission's role has declined vis-a-vis the Council, the parliament's "control" function is in effect diminished, its energies often appearing futile.

Although its competence until 1961 was limited to matters coming under the community's jurisdiction, since then it has taken up any matter including foreign policy and security issues. Despite a lack of a direct popular mandate, it often speaks as the "conscience" of the community. Its members do not hesitate to criticize, often vehemently, EC policies.

Parliament is also consulted by the Council before all decisions on community regulations are taken, but the Council is not obligated to listen to the parliament's views. The parliament's main function is thus to provide a public forum, and the key element in its efforts to influence decisions through clarification and publicity are the questions—over 1,200 last year—which it poses to the Council and the Commission.

Unlike national parliaments, the European Parliament has had only minimal budgetary powers. A recent improvement, however, gives the parliament the right to modify the distribution of budget funds and to reject the whole community budget for "important grounds." The Council can overturn such an action by a qualified majority vote. Last fall the parliament flexed its muscles over the draft 1976 budget, but a potential confrontation was avoided when the Council went a part of the way toward meeting parliamentary demands.

The EC's budget still relies for about forty percent of its revenues on contributions from the member states. Once these revenues are derived entirely from community instruments, such as revenue from value-added

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taxes in addition to tariff and farm levy duties, and hence escape the control of the member states individually, the arguments for democratic control at the community level will become harder to ignore.

Tindemans' recommendations for an early improvement in the parliament's role were modest. Even so, some think his suggestions go too far. The Commission, for example, finds its unique right to initiate community policies being challenged by Tindemans' suggestion that parliamentary resolutions be considered by the Council. France is likely to balk at the recommendation that the parliament be empowered to confirm—and by implication, reject—the member states' choice for Commission president.

Direct Elections: Background

Despite the current effort to play down this issue, the future powers of the parliament are inevitably linked with the direct election of its members. The Nine are very aware that a directly elected parliament—keenly conscious of its representativeness and legitimacy—may be prompt to demand extended powers.

It was never envisaged that the current system, under which members are drawn from national legislatures, would be permanent. As early as 1960 the parliament had drafted a convention to implement the treaty provision stating that "The Assembly shall draw up proposals for elections by direct universal suffrage in accordance with a uniform procedure in all member states. The Council shall, acting unanimously, lay down the appropriate provisions, which it shall recommend to member states for adoption in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements." The parliament's initiative was largely a dead letter until recently.

Supporters of direct elections maintain that they will:

- Provide dramatic reaffirmation of the principles of parliamentary democracy and free elections. The elections will be the largest democratic polling ever held in Europe: the community has about 170 million registered voters.
- Demonstrate that suffrage is a "European" civil right which helps to give the community's citizens a sense of belonging to a political whole.
- Establish democratic control over those aspects of government which have been—and will be—transferred to the EC.

The decision to hold direct elections was made by the Nine in principle in December 1974 and confirmed a year later. Crucial to the agreement was

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a reversal of long-standing French opposition, which reflected a general awareness that the community needed a boost, but probably also a belief that the potential "damage" to national sovereignty could be held within bounds. For the pragmatic Chancellor Schmidt, meanwhile, a more authoritative parliament is seen as an effective way to control the community budget, however wishful this judgment may be. A new convention drafted by a committee of the European Parliament—the Patijn Report—was adopted by an overwhelming parliamentary majority, with the Gaullists abstaining, in January 1975.

Major Problems

A working group set up by the European Council has already made progress on many of the technical and practical questions covered in the convention. Major difficulties are being raised in some of the member states, however, over basic issues entailed in the move toward direct elections, and some circles question whether the nine heads of government on April 1-2 will be able to pronounce on an agreed draft. In any case, ratification may by no means be an easy process, since some domestic parties will not want to consent to the elections before there is agreement on questions—constituency size and voting method for example—that must still be decided by each country.

Size and seat allocation: This is one of the thorniest problems that will require a decision at the top. The starting point for the Patijn Report was that no country should have fewer seats in the elected parliament than it has in the present body. This was a particular favor to the smaller countries: Luxembourg's present six seats, for example, were regarded as the minimum—this would at least permit representation in the most important parliamentary committees. Luxembourg is thus overrepresented in the parliament, however, and if a strictly proportional system were based on Luxembourg's ratio of delegates to population, a new parliament would contain thousands of members. Patijn's proposal is for a total of 355 seats, and other formulas offered since would increase the number further in order to accommodate the small countries.

The French, however, demand strict proportionality of representation to population and would achieve this in a 284-member body. This means reducing Luxembourg's seats to three. The five small countries together, moreover, would get only a quarter of the seats held by France, Germany, the UK, and Italy. Britain also favors proportional representation in the distribution of seats, although Paris is expected to hold out longest.

Other issues are at stake in the distribution of seats. There must be a number sufficient to accommodate representatives of all political parties.

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Proposals for Allocations of Seats in European Parliament

	Present parliament	Patijn Report	EP's political committee	France	Ireland
Belgium	14	23	24	13	26
Britain	36	67	116	59	70
Denmark	10	17	14	8	20
France	36	65	108	55	68
Germany	36	71	128	65	74
Holland	14	27	31	17	30
Ireland	10	13	10	6	18
Italy	36	66	113	58	69
Luxembourg	6	6	6	3	9
Total	198	355	550	284	384

Denmark, for example, has ten—and the French proposal would give it only eight seats. More important is the resentment of some “regions” that they might have fewer representatives than some of the small countries. This is at present a particular problem for London, which has to answer demands from the increasingly autonomy-minded Scots, and Welsh, that they not be under-represented with regard to the Irish, Luxembourgers or Danes.

Election date: Participation by all members on a single date would have a positive dramatic impact, and most opinion favors it. But it is difficult to organize. It would, for example, entail European elections on a different date from national elections, and it could prove highly embarrassing for a member government to have the party in opposition boosted by a European election in the middle of the life of its own legislature. Britain has been concerned also that voter turn-out might be very poor unless the European election coincided with a national test. Copenhagen has been especially insistent on this matter and Denmark wants the convention to give it the freedom to hold national elections to coincide with the European elections. On balance, the other members now appear resigned not to hold simultaneous national and European elections. They are still faced with choosing a day that accords with national customs and, if a compromise on one day proves impossible, arranging for not announcing the results in one country before another country has started voting. This question must be decided, of course, as part of the initial convention.

Dual mandate: Should members of the European Parliament be permitted—or even required—to be members also of their national parliaments? On the one hand, members already complain about their double workload; this will grow more burdensome as EC activity increases. On the other hand,

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there is a belief that dual membership is mutually reinforcing and a concern that membership in only the Strasbourg body might encourage a loosening of national party discipline. The question is a particularly touchy one for Denmark, which is demanding that the dual-mandate principle be permitted and is considering a formula whereby a Danish citizen elected to the European Parliament would automatically receive a national legislative mandate. The parliament's draft convention recommends that a decision on the dual mandate question be left up to the member state, at least for 1978, but the Danes want the question to be settled in the initial convention.

Uniform electoral system: The parliament has proposed that existing national voting systems be used for the 1978 elections and that the community treaty requirement for uniform procedures be met initially simply by acknowledging that the elections will be free, universal, direct, and secret. The nine governments may be able to agree to this in April, but demands are likely within some of the legislatures to examine present national voting arrangements before the initial convention is ratified. The postponement of uniform procedures will thus not have avoided current controversy. Since seven of the EC members have some form of proportional representation system, Britain and France will ultimately be under pressure to change their majority, winner-take-all, systems—already a subject of controversy in the UK. The inequity of a majority system will be exaggerated in the larger constituencies from which European delegates will be elected. The delineation of these districts themselves will be a problem in some of the member states. Under Britain's present rules, for example, the Liberal Party is unlikely to win any seats to the European Parliament. In France, proportional representation would increase the left's share of delegates, and Socialist leader Mitterrand has already tied his support for direct elections to use of the proportional system. Some Gaullists, meanwhile, knowing that it could take years before a true uniform system is adopted—a judgment seconded in the British government's recent "green paper" on direct elections—are maintaining that agreement on common procedures is a pre-condition for any direct elections.

Parties Coordinate Platforms

The implications of a directly elected parliament are not only immense for national voting systems, but are also gradually seizing political imaginations in other respects. They have already heightened the tone of debate in the European Parliament itself and are providing a stimulus to cooperation among like-minded political groupings, which are increasingly looking forward to more cohesive pan-European parties. All of Europe's major political movements are engaged in trying to reach common platforms and develop a strategy for the elections.

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Socialists and Social Democrats: Last month West European Socialist and Social Democratic leaders agreed in Helsingor to try to fight the elections on a common platform. The Socialist group in the European Parliament is currently the only one with deputies from all of the member states. Agreement on a platform will nevertheless prove difficult; the British Labor Party, for example, did not even join the Helsingor confederation, nor did it take part in the discussion of elections. The national parties were deeply divided over the central issue of cooperation with the Communists, although this debate was somewhat eased by the widespread agreement that it is up to each party to determine for itself a relationship with the Communists. Former Chancellor Brandt—the first important personality to announce his readiness to stand in the 1978 election—is expected to call another conference to work out guidelines for a common electoral platform.

Liberals: The European Liberal parties, representing an admittedly diverse electorate of nearly 20 million people, are also trying to federate, and an initial conclave took place last fall. A meeting in Stuttgart in March will bring together 12 parties which consider the “liberal” label fitting: three from France, two each from Denmark and Italy, and one from each of the other EC countries except Ireland. The objective is to arrange for a full-fledged congress late this year to work out a joint electoral platform. Organization may not go smoothly, however, since the credentials of some candidate parties—the French Independent Republicans and the Italian Liberal Party, for example—are being challenged. Prime Minister Thorn of Luxembourg is considered a likely choice for federation president.

Christian Democrats: Political forces of the center—mainly the Christian Democratic parties—and the center-right are also coming to grips with a strategy for the elections. The political bureau of the European Union of Christian Democrats meets to discuss a “political manifesto” in The Hague this month. The German CDU recently proposed the formation of a “European Peoples’ Party,” but the Italians have refused to participate. At its annual conference last fall, the British Conservative Party called for a formal alliance with “like-minded” parties on the continent in order to oppose more effectively the Socialists in parliament. Were such an alignment to develop, it would—at least in the existing parliament—be roughly equivalent to, although almost certainly less united than, the Socialist grouping.

Communists: Regardless of their present public disposition, the French Communists may have little choice but eventually to campaign vigorously for European parliamentary seats—even though their platform, in contrast to that of their Italian brothers, is likely to be resolutely nationalist in tone. One report nevertheless alleges that Italian Communist Party chief Berlinguer has already persuaded Marchais of the usefulness of working together in Strasbourg. The Italians see advantages in minimizing the perception of their

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“threat” to Italy through appearing as a minority within Europe as a whole; the French, considerably further removed from real power at home, see more mileage to be gotten from a chauvinistic stance. The Italians do want Communist influence to be felt, however, and for this they will need French help in the parliament.

In any case, the issue that now plagues the left in many European countries—cooperation between Socialists and Communists—will be writ large in a directly elected parliament, where Communists will have enough seats to make collaboration with other left-wing groups seem worthwhile. Research at the University of Scotland, for example, while showing that direct elections will probably produce political groups of about the same relative strength as at present, does predict an approximate five percent increase for the Communists.

Outlook

As the elections approach, public debate will center on the nature of parliament’s role within the community’s decision-making system. If the parliament becomes more important, where should the balancing “executive” power be located? The call of some Gaullists for greater control by the European Council—the nine heads of government—as well as Giscard’s recent scouting of a small “directorate” over community affairs are not unrelated to the prospect of a more assertive Strasbourg assembly.

The electoral campaign itself may increasingly reflect the question of political alliances, and the possible emergence of a powerful parliamentary alliance of the left may alone instill caution among the Nine as they consider extending new powers to the parliament. Exaggerated hopes for a speedy transformation into a true European legislature may thus be disappointed. Although the deputies themselves will call for increased powers, granting them requires a unanimity among the Nine that is now far from achievable.

The elections will still mark a political event of great potential significance for Europe. Although political forces view the prospects from the diversity of outlook they represent, there is unquestionably a popular majority in favor of having a direct voice in community affairs. In finally opening the doors to such participation, the Nine are affirming that “Europe” will gradually assume a political life of its own. The consequences of an introduction of democratic politics are uncertain. Failure to take the step—another indefinite postponement of elections—could only further sap European confidence in its will to unite.

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